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Interview with Anita Leaning

Elena Rue

Anita Leaning

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Interview with Anita Leaning

Accession number: ELFS-ER-F103100.A

Researcher's name: Elena Rue

Event: Interview with Anita Leaning

Place: Hopewell 5 Bison Inc.

Fieldnotes:

It was a beautiful day for my interview - brisk, clear, and sunny. I arrived at Hopewell 5 Bison Inc. exactly at 4:00 pm. Before stepping out of the car I was inspected by a small black lab until he lost interest and scampered down the driveway. Anita came outside to greet me with two of her sons toddling behind her. I was relieved to see that she was very friendly. We went inside and I was introduced to her three sons and stepdaughter. I was excited to find out that Keith is from England. I have lived in England for two separate years so I used my familiarity with the country as a sort of icebreaker. As we sat down at their dining room table Anita was mobbed by little dirty-faced boys, but they obeyed - with a little help from her stepdaughter Sophie - when she told them to go and play upstairs. Aside from a short interruption by a hungry four year-old, the interview was undisturbed by the full house. I was very nervous about this at first, but as the interview progressed I forgot all about it and found other technicalities to worry about. Anita seemed embarrassed about the clutter and chaos of having four kids at home, but interacting with people other than college students was very refreshing to me.

I began by asking if it was okay to tape the interview and informing her about the release form that she would be asked to sign. She was very open to anything and I was impressed by how eager she was to help in any way she could. She had also set aside some brochures and other information about bison and their farm for me to take with me. My first question was very general: "How did you get into farming?" I was pleased that I asked that because it answered a lot of general questions that I was interested in knowing like where she and her husband Keith were from, how they got interested in farming, and why they chose bison. I was also pleased because it seemed to be a subject that she enjoyed talking about. Keith grew up in an urban part of England and had always dreamed of living on a farm. It had also been a dream of his to raise bison. Anita admitted that raising bison was not what she imagined herself doing when she was younger, but she seemed very interested in the operation and likes what she does. Keith has a full-time job and uses the farm as a sort of stress release and fun activity. They used Keith's outside income to fund the launch of their business. The operation is completely run by Keith when he's not working and Anita when she's not taking care of the house and kids. I thought it was amusing when, at one point in the interview, Anita mentioned that she doesn't know how farmers manage to accomplish all that they do, because I was amazed at how much she and her husband can handle.

The Leaning's bison business is in its beginning stages. They have only had their own bison for about three years. The number of bison that they raise reflects how much they sell and so far the numbers have been rising. They have worked their way up to 36 this year and if business continues to expand so will they. The number of bison processed (she liked to use "processed" instead of "slaughtered") each year also depends on their customer demand – so far this year they've taken eight. Right now Anita has to deal with the problem of demand for different cuts – The Kenyon Inn needs a large supply of steaks from the Leanings, but this leaves the Leanings with a large supply of burger that they don't have an outlet for. One of Anita's jobs is to find a place for meat in situations like this, but she seemed confident that it would get sold. They generally don't have to search for their customers; word of mouth is their biggest advertisement. The Leanings sell all of their products locally. This surprised me because I didn't know the extent of the popularity of bison meat. I wouldn't have thought that a rural community could support a unique operation like this, but apparently bison is common and ever increasing.

Anita seemed very optimistic about the growing popularity of bison across the country. This is due to the lower fat and cholesterol and other health benefits of bison over beef, chicken, and turkey. There is also a growing organic demand in the US and their farm is organically certified. The Leanings feel that this is an attractive feature for their farm.

Anita wasn't sure what percentage they sell wholesale or retail, but when Keith came home (as I was waiting for my ride) they decided that it was about 70% retail and 30% wholesale. If they had a choice they said would probably do all retail because they get a better deal, but each year the percentage is different depending on the demand.

I was pleased to hear a positive response when I asked about how the meat was priced. I have always associated agriculture with unfair prices and farmers getting ripped off, but this didn't seem to be the case for the Leanings. Anita was sort of apologetic when she explained that it was more expensive than most meat, but she followed that with an explanation of why this is the case. She said that they don't try to rip people off, but the cost of raising buffalo is more expensive than cattle so the price is going to reflect that.

I asked Anita what the challenges are that she and Keith face, and I was expecting a business frustration concerning prices or competition, but the only one she mentioned was managing time between work and family. Between Keith's full-time job and the bison operation he is extremely busy and it's hard for him to find time for everything.

When I asked whether or not Anita thought there was a farming community in Knox County her eyes widened and she gave me a big nod and a grin. She grew up in Southern Ohio and said that her county was very poor and there wasn't much of a farm community there. I was very interested to hear her story because she and Keith just recently moved here both from outside the county and Keith from outside the country! Anita said that everyone knew who they were before they knew who anyone was. A constant stream of people welcomed them to the area and brought some of their own

produce to share with them. This generosity was not grounded solely on curiosity - whenever anyone is in trouble or needs a little bit of help there is always someone eager and willing. Anita said that last winter her well dried up when Keith was in Germany and before she had told one person about her troubles, multiple neighbors offered their showers and other facilities, and helped her tend to the bison. From her account it sounds like the farming community in her area is thriving.

During the interview we touched upon how "Homegrown" and the Farmer's Market have affected the community, but she also elaborated when we were walking around the property. She's not sure how much "Homegrown" increased their sales, but she was very impressed with it and felt that it was very good advertising for all the local producers. She took advantage of the Farmer's Market this summer and felt that it was a good way to increase awareness as well. She actually sold copies of "Homegrown" at her station at the market. Some days she said that it wasn't really worth her time to be out there if the sales were low, but even then she enjoyed the social aspect of the event. It was also a fun place for her children to go and occasionally sell lemonade. Along with "Homegrown" and the Farmer's Market, Anita feels that the "Heart of Ohio Tour" is something that raises awareness in the community about local operations. She said that it brought hundreds of people out to their place and many of them were unfamiliar with bison and bison meat.

Anita mentioned that she put signs up advertising the market in the stores near her home, but she doesn't think that many people took advantage of the opportunity. She feels that some of the old farmers hurt themselves or miss opportunities by avoiding change. Many of the older farmers that she knows get set in their ways and don't want to try new things. Anita was also very enthusiastic about the farm organizations in Knox County that provide support and aid for local farmers. Her "outsider" perspective was very interesting because she doesn't feel that the farmers that have always lived here appreciate the exceptional assistance they receive.

After I had asked all of my questions, gotten my release signed, and gotten a name of a contact, Anita and I went outside to take some photos. They have a medium sized back yard and at the edge of it is the electric wiring for the bison. She pointed out the different fenced in areas for male and female bison eating and the pasture for grazing. We walked up to the pens and I took a few photos of the females eating from some sort of trough. They seemed very confused by the fact that I was standing there with a black box in front of my face and stared at me for the majority of the time. As I took photos Anita took a turn and asked me a bunch of questions. She was very open and was excited about the fact that I was taking photos because she said she's always been interested in photography. She was very shy in front of the camera and politely asked me to not include her in any of my pictures. She seemed interested in why I came all the way from Iowa to Ohio and what I was studying. She then poured a bucket of grain over the fence to coax the bull to come down from the pasture so I could see him up close. After a minute or two of deciding whether or not it was worth his time to come all the way down the hill, their breeding bull casually trotted down to the grain. I was AMAZED at the sight of this animal. I don't think I have ever seen anything that size so close before. I

stood and marveled at its bulk for a couple moments before I began taking photos. I was very excited and took about a half dozen pictures of this one bison. As I took these, Anita continued chatting and telling me how she and Keith met, how they worked things out, and how he researched bison for years before he began preparing for his own operation.

After my photo shoot with the bull Anita showed me some of the equipment and facilities they use. She explained how they coax the bison into a pen and lead them down a fenced-in walkway into a rather expensive contraption that holds them tight so they can't get away or hurt anyone while they are being weighed, examined, or tested by the veterinarian. Much to Anita's embarrassment, there were bison skulls decorating some of the posts of the pens that they use. She kind of laughed at them and professed that she's working towards getting much more landscaping and more traditional farm décor around their property.

By this time I was pleased with the amount of information I had collected from Anita and the amount of visual information I had obtained with my camera so I was ready to leave. I was worried that there would be an awkward period of time while I was waiting for my ride to arrive from Gambier, but she smoothed the way and continued to ask me questions about my family and filled me in on her children. She was lovely to chat with. While we were talking Keith came home. I was pleased that I actually got to meet him because in my personal experience trying to set up an interview I discovered that he is one of the busiest men alive. He seemed delighted to have someone interested in his operation and said that I should come back or call if I had any further questions. Anita mentioned to Keith a couple questions that she didn't feel that she answered sufficiently and one of them was some further contacts. Both Keith and Anita thought long and hard about other people we should contact and finally took my number down so they could think some more and call me later with more information. Soon after Keith came home my ride came to pick me up. As Anita walked me out the door she modestly said that she hoped she was of some help to us. I told her that she was a great help -- I felt very good saying it because I actually felt that the whole visit went really well and I wasn't just saying it because we're supposed to.

Now that I've experienced an interview I can finally understand how focused you need to be to catch everything that's happening. I also now know the rush you can feel when of coming out of an interview. It was a great feeling for me because I half expected something disastrous to happen and I don't think it did (fingers crossed!). Overall I was proud of the methods I used. I made a very clear outline of questions I wanted to ask, but as I learned from my first site visit, it's not always going to follow exactly how you predicted it to. I skipped around a lot and got some questions answered simultaneously with others, but I was prepared for that and felt that I pretty much got everything covered that I hoped to. I also jotted down some tips and reminders in the margins of my outline that we stressed in class like "don't interrupt," "be flexible," "don't talk too much," and "ask follow-up questions." I felt nerdy doing this, but I know that glancing at these tips from time to time kept them in my mind so I wouldn't get carried away. I might find out by listening to my tape that I didn't always follow these guides, but for the most part I

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think I did. The thing I worried most about was interrupting. Sometimes I get too eager and cut people off, but I am aware of this and tried to make a conscious effort not to.

I felt like the rapport with Anita was very good. I think I was lucky with this first interview because she's one of those people who almost anyone can have a good rapport with. She seemed interested in me and I was definitely interested in her and her operation so we had a lot to talk about on and off the record.